Playing at Religion

Matthew 11: 7-19
September 21, 1969
John M. Buchanan

Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says: 'Some gardner must tend this plot.' The other disagrees: 'There is not gardner.' So they pitch their tent and set a watch. No gardner is ever seen. 'But perhaps he is an invisible gardner.' So they set up a barbed wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol it with bloodhounds. But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give a cry. Yet still the "Believer" is not convinced. 'But there is a gardner, invisible, intangible, insensitive to electric shocks, a gardner who comes secretly to look after the garden he loves.' At last the Sceptic despairs: 'But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardner differ from an imaginary gardner or even from no gardner at all?' [Martin C. D'Arcy, S.J. in Varities of Unbelief, M. Marty p. 49]

That story, attributed to a Frency theologian, is a parable of the spiritual predicament of modern man. Indeed we have pitched our tents and built our fences and retreated behing endless collections of theological jargon. But the relentless press of modern science, modern thought, has not abated, and the general theory of the times is that the gazdner is either totally non-existant, or else an imaginery figment that ought to be preserved for the security and health of human life. In either case the articulate Christian is confronting a rather serious challenge to his integrity and to his faith. *

The story of civilization can be described as a man's show but steady emergence from dependency on God to a state of independence. "Secularism" is the word for it, and we are living in an age where it has come to full fruition. At some point in the last century the scales were tipped. Up until that point the idea of God played a determining role in the affairs of men; God the ruler and controller of nature; God the providential mover in history God the protecter of good men and the judge of evil men. But the scales have been tipped; the process is reversed. As one writer put it: "We don't pray for rain anymore - we build irrigation systems: we don't pray for deliverence from a plague, we invent a vaccine." In our time men have "come of age" and learned to do for themselves many of the things once attributed to God. And the result is a severe theologic al predicament.

Alfred North Whitehead observed that: "Each age has its dominant preoccupation, and during the three modern centuries the cosmology derived from science has been asserting itself at the expense of older points of view with their origins elsewhere." [Ibid p.135] And Walter Lippman: "The radical novelty of modern science lies precisely in the rejection of the belief, which is at the heart of religion, that the forces which move the stars and atoms are contingent upon the preferences of the human heart." [Ibid p. 135]

Science tipped the scale. We have learned that heaven is not "up there": that certain atmospheric conditions gave girth to Hurricane Camille, not the wrath of God: and that people get lung cancer because they smoke - not because they offended the Heavenly Father. A perceptive person will realize that science has done Christian faith a great favor by precipitating a crisis; by

making it impossible to get by with muddy thinking: by forcing Christians to dig deeply for their theology. But, in fact, most Christians have not bothered. Bit by bit they have witnessed the erosion of religions certitude - and the result is secularism. John Courtney Murray said it well: "One would have to say that modern godless man is characterized by his will to understand and explaining the world without God." (Ibid. p. 50)

Some of us may have been inspired by the success of Apollo 11: Some may be stimulated to deeper faith by the awesome phrase "footprints on the moon." But I have a hunch that the total effect will be a further shaking of an already unsteady popular theology. We live in an age when the reality of God is simply no longer being taken very seriously.

And yet, in the midst of all this secularity - this theological "credibility gap" - religion is not only surviving but thriving quite nicely. We're not quite as strong statistically as we were ten years ago, but still the vast majority of Americans look with favor on things religious - (even Johnny Carson thought it was "nice" that Tiny tim chose December 25 as his wedding date), and a good percentage of the American people make a regular practice of worshipping their God - whatever they believe or disbelieve about him. Thus a strange paradox - a culture that is godless - and people who go right on practicing religion. How is it possible? It's possible only if a lot of these people are just "playing at religion" - going through the motions for some reason or another, but not taking themselves very seriously while they are so engaged.

My text this morning is that incident recorded in the 11th chapter of Matthew. Jesus was defending John the Baptist. The people had flocked to John to hear his preaching. But they really hadn't taken him seriously. In fact, their shallowness was indicated by their criticizing John for being too severe. Likewise they were attempting to justify their apathy about Jesus by calling him a glutton and a drunkard. They reminded him of playing children who couldn't agree on a game.

It was a wry analogy - but brutally honest. Everyone had seen children playing. Two favorite games were "Wedding" and "funeral." Children imitated the demonstrative ritual which accompanied both public events - weddings were characterized by loud singing and dancing; a funeral procession included professional mourners wailing and throwing themselves on the ground. And so the children played the games - and they argued about which to play and sometimes their childishness resulted in no game at all.

The people around him were like that, Jesus said. And to understand what he meant we must make two observations about the act of "playing." First of all, to play like a child is to pretend. It is to place ritual over reality. We have two large sewer pipes in our back yard - at least in my eyes they are sewer pipes. But to children they are horses, or stage coaches, or mysterious caverns. And what they become depends entirely on the particular ritual chosen by the child. Reality is irrevelant.

In the second place, to play is to go through the motions in the security that ones actions will have no lasting effect. Thus in play it is quite possible to kill your good friend - or your brother - without any repercussions. In fact, an interesting thing about play is that it is impossible when one player begins to mean what he is doing. Play ends in frustration around our house when one boy takes seriously the ritual of being killed all morning by his brother.

Jesus was saying that his contemporaries were like children at play in their practice of religiosity. As in child's play, ritual counted more than reality. Observing the sacrificial law was more important than actually living grateful lives. As in child's play - no one really expected the results of the exercise to be of any consequence. So one could go through the motions of devotion to the God of Justice and then steal money from one's tennants. His contemporaries were "playing at religion" and I wonder whether the preponderence of religion today - in a culture that has totally rejected the possibility of God is not evidence of the same situation. I wonder if we are not playing at religion.

Recent studies of American church goers have revealed among other things that there is as much bigotry and racial prejudice in the church as there is in the non-churched portion of the population. That, I would suggest, is utterly impossible, unless a lot of those church-goers are just playing at their religion. We are reminded every year at about this time that the Lord who demands total self-giving, actually gets about 2% of our treasure as an expression of our faith, and I would suggest that that too is possible only if a lot of us are just "playing a game."

Someone recently asked James Foreman why he brought his demands to the church - instead of General Motors or I.B.M. His answer was that General Motors and I.B.M. never said their purpose was to feed the hungry, and help the poor, and liberate the oppressed - but the church has said that. Mr. Foreman's marxist ideology and violent rhetoric is most offensive to me. But he has done this - he has caught us in the act of "playing at religion." For there would be no James Foreman today, no racial revolution if the Church of Jesus Christ, and the Christian people of this nation had been doing something other than playing for the last two hundred years.

You and I are part of the secular culture of the 20th century. We are part of the Church of Jesus Christ of which I have been so critical. We are able - you and I - to engage in an exercise of criticism such as this - but it is no more than exercise until we focus. You and I, specifically, are related to each other through this congregation of Christians. And so let's look here, Are we "playing at religion" in Bethany Presbyterian Church?

There are many aspects of the life of this congregation that might be examined in light of this question. But one thing we all do: one activity is at the center of our experience as a congregation, and that is corporate worship. In my conversations with you - and in my personal reflections upon our Sunday morning experience I sense a rather vague feeling that worship is not really too important. I sense that we are most vulnerable at this point to the charge of playing - placing ritual over reality, not really expecting anything of consequence to result.

While I was thinking about this topic last week I came across an article in The Christian Century (9/17/69) by Dr. Browne Barr, a very effective pastor, which was quite helpful. Dr. Barr proposes that crisis in worship today is at the point of preaching. Congregations are deluged with what he terms "Pop Sermons" which, like Pop Art, are "so negligible as artifacts that all which remains for the critic (or worshipper) is to talk about, around, behind and across it." Men are not moved by such art, they simply discuss it. So, men are not moved by such sermons, they merely discuss them.

I was both humbled and stirred by his description of a real sermon: "It is an instrument by which the great hand of the eternal grasps us, people and preacher alike; a hand which leads or drives

us out to the periphery of life...; a hand which shakes us out of complacency and knocks the carefully nurtured dust off our ease."

But this is not the case. And I am suggesting it is not the case because we are merely playing at religion. Dr. Barr concludes by blaming both preacher and people: "The sermon which is not prepared by the preacher and anticipated by the people in the expectation that God can and will use our discourse to reveal himself is not sermon at all." I would add to that my conviction that a service of worship that is not entered in the common anticipation that we will be forgiven and given new life, that God's word will somehow be communicated to us - perhaps in spite of the preacher, that we are going to confront the living God in the company of his people, that we are going to be renewed and picked up and healed and given strength for the next week - worship that is not preceeded by a sure anticipation of that is not worship at all. It is "playing at religion."

I would suggest to you that worship will continue to be sterile, and faith rather empty, until we stop playing and commit ourselves to the life and death seriousness of what we are about.

Albert Outler speaks to our crisis: "Now the reality of God becomes the central issue once more, and the obvious task of a new generation is to convince men of the reality of God, his presence and his grace, in a world come of age and gone to pot." (Ibid. C. C. p. 191)

That, I believe, begins here, in this sanctuary, as we forget the game of religion we have been trying to play, and bet our lives on the living God. It begins when we risk ourselves in commitment to Jesus Christ; when we open ourselves to his redeeming and renewing love.

It is time for that. It is time to stop playing and to start being serious. St. Paul said it extremely well: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child - but when I became a man I gave up childish ways." Amen.

Almighty God, forgive us for playing at religion. Forgive us for closing our minds and hearts to the reality of your presence, the imperative of your love and the urgency of your call. Grant us the maturity to live lives of trust and devotion, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.